

**Barry Mehler, "Thinking History vs Teaching History," Candidates Statement for Merit (Big Rapids, December 1, 2014).**

**Teaching Philosophy: *Thinking History vs Teaching History***

*Thinking the Twentieth Century* (NY 2012) is an attempt by the renowned historian and public intellectual, Tony Judt (1948-2010), to "think" history. The book is a series of conversations the author had with Timothy Snyder, following an Eastern European intellectual tradition of presenting history in the form of extended conversations, which are personal encounters with history. *Thinking history* is not an attempt to present history, "as it actually happened." It is rather an individual encounter with the past. Walter Benjamin captured this notion in his "Thesis on the Philosophy of History," writing, that "the past can be seized only as an image which flashes up at the instant when it can be recognized." Thinking is something that is done at a particular moment in time by a particular individual.<sup>1</sup>

Thinking history is not the same as learning or teaching history. Learning is about the acquisition of information. Most of what a student does is in the category of "learning." Thinking, on the other hand, takes place only in the presence of a question that has no ready answer. While my courses involve a good deal of traditional learning, the real focus of my pedagogy is to stimulate thinking about unanswered questions.

You can't think history if you understand it. Take the causes of the Civil War, for example. Teaching the causes of the Civil War implies that the causes are well understood and the teacher simply has to explain them. The student studies the list and demonstrates on a test or essay that he or she has mastered the material. No thinking is involved. The teacher remembers the causes and the students learn them. In thinking the causes of the Civil War, neither the students or the teacher know the causes of the Civil War. This is not to say that the teacher doesn't know the textbook list of causes, but beneath all the explanations there is still a mystery. After all, slavery existed everywhere in the Americas and ended everywhere in the Americas. This transformation from slave to free labor resulted in only one Civil War. In this light, the traditional causes for the Civil War prove less than satisfactory. In other words, the second approach involves "thinking through" the history while maintaining a certain level of doubt because large historical phenomena can never be completely understood. Thinking history involves finding a perspective that brings the standard explanations into question. Thus, to think through the causes of the Civil War is to take a fresh look at what are seen traditionally as the causes of the war. The focus of my approach is to introduce students to an individual confrontation with history and to do that I have developed a pedagogy focused on *thinking history*.

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<sup>1</sup> (Walter Benjamin, "Thesis on the Philosophy of History," quoted from *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*, edited by Hannah Arendt (New York: Schocken 1969) p. 255.

**Pedagogy**

My courses are all designed as a TV variety show entitled, "Sympathy for the Devil." The idea is to present the course material in an unusual way which takes the students out of the normal classroom environment and transports them onto the set of a TV show, where the rules of the game are all new and strange. Many students have reported in their initial journals, a collective experience of bewilderment, often expressed as, "Am I in the right room? This can't be a history class?"

With the shades down and the lights all out, the show begins with the Rolling Stones singing the show's theme song, "Sympathy for the Devil."

Please allow me to introduce myself  
I'm a man of wealth and taste  
I've been around for a long, long year  
Stole many a man's soul and face

I rode a tank  
With a general's rank  
When the blitzkrieg raged  
And the bodies stank

Pleased to meet you  
Hope you guess my name  
But what's puzzling you  
Is the nature of my game

The song recounts the atrocities committed throughout history by Lucifer, who wears many human faces. Lucifer, however, is not a single entity, in fact, "every cop is a criminal/ and all the sinners saints." In other words, "As heads is tails" Lucifer is simply the other side of every coin. "But what's puzzling you is the nature of my game." The unanswered question, which is the theme of the show, centers around the nature of the devils game. Why do good intentions so often pave the road to hell? How do we explain the workings of evil in history? At the show, our sympathy is with the devil, we prefer dark to light.<sup>2</sup> The problem, of course, is figuring out which side is which, after all, every cop is a criminal and all the sinners saints. Thus, the theme song, presents us with our first enigma, the first of our unanswered questions, that remain unanswered through the course of the season's shows. I should point out that I often juxtapose theological modes of thinking with rationalist and scientific modes of thought. Everything about the show is a metaphor. Theological modes of thinking are just a metaphorical way of understanding something. I do not mean to imply that there is a malevolent supernatural force in the universe.

After the theme song, I introduce our sponsor, Camels cigarettes. Holding an archaic pack of unfiltered Camels, I launch into a long soliloquy urging my students to "take

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<sup>2</sup> The florescant lighting can cause migraines, but I never use that as an explanation. I find the low lighting creates a characteristic ambiance. It also eliminates the use of smartphones which glow conspicuously in the dark.

the Camels challenge, smoke Camels for thirty days and see for yourself what a difference this fine American product can do for you.” I explain that when I was student everyone knew that smoking was good for you. I play a few clips from old Camels commercials, asserting that “more doctors smoke Camels than any other cigarette.” I explain that it was commonly believed that smoking aided digestion after a good meal; helped to focus ones attention; improved athletic performance, and increased sexual pleasure. Now, of course, everyone knows that smoking is bad for you *but everything we ever knew with absolute certainty, we now know was completely wrong*. We knew with absolute certainty that the earth was the center of the universe, that the sun went around the earth, that the Milky Way galaxy was the entire universe, that matter and energy were separate things... all these certainties have been proven wrong. Doesn’t that suggest that everything we now know with certainty may also be wrong?

At this point in the journey, my students realize they are in a history class, but it’s not like any class they have ever taken before. I have created an environment where they are wondering what is going on and they don’t have an answer! I have them thinking, and I continue taking them down a seductively logical Alice in Wonderland interpretation of history. I argue that when everyone knew that smoking was good and when more doctors smoked Camels than any other cigarette, the United States was the wealthiest nation on earth, Michigan was the engine of capitalism and the arsenal of democracy. I point out that our sponsor is not just the sponsor of our show, tobacco is the sponsor of our nation. Without tobacco, the colonies would never have established themselves as viable economic enterprises. The United States as we know it, would not exist without this iconic product. Is it any wonder then that we have fallen so low after turning our backs on the product that made us great. Furthermore, today, India and China, two countries notorious for their smoking habits have economies that are smoking and societies that are moving towards global domination. My final plea to my students, “if not for yourself, do it for your country, do it for Michigan - take the Camels challenge and see what this great American product can do for America and for Michigan. Remember, when we were a nation of smokers, we were the greatest nation on earth! And I believe we can be great again, if only we will embrace the things that made us great in the first place.” In other words, the lesson I’m drawing from this history is absurd. They know there is something wrong with the whole logic of the class. Classes shouldn’t have commercials, what is going on? Their initial journals testify to their bewilderment, but also to their excitement.

### **Predestination**

The very next topic in my opening lecture is an explanation of the grading system, which I tell them is based on the Calvinist doctrine of predestination. As with the cigarette commercials, the concept of predestination will be repeatedly brought to their attention. According to the Calvinist doctrine of predestination, salvation is entirely a matter of God’s grace and has absolutely nothing to do with a persons works. I tell them that before they ever set foot in the class, their final grades were assigned and that nothing they do during the semester can change their predestined

grade. It makes no sense and that is the point. The syllabus always contains a section which outlines how student work is evaluated. They might, for example, have a midterm and a final exam worth together 250 points and two writing assignments worth another 250 points. Some students immediately understand that their grade depends on their performance, and my bizarre explanation of the grading system, like everything else thus far, is not meant to be taken literally. Thus, some students understand the reality, but wonder at the meaning of the performance, while other students wonder if I'm serious. This is an ambiguity they will have to work out for themselves. Either way, I have gotten them thinking.

As the semester develops, I repeatedly return to the concept of predestination. Buried beneath the notion of predestination is another challenge to our endeavor, for if our fate is predetermined, what use is history? Oedipus knows his fate, he has learned the lesson of history and he does everything he can to avoid his destiny. So what value was the knowledge in the first place? These are questions that may never occur to my students, but it is essential that the presentation be multi-layered and have enough depth for a graduate students while at the same time be entertaining and simple enough for the novice.

I explain to the students that the Calvinist doctrine of predestination has played an important role in American history. I challenge them to write an extra credit paper explaining the concept and how it has impacted the development of American institutions. Many students at some point in the semester will comment on the concept. Repetition of the question is the key to keeping them thinking about it. My classes are basically composed of puzzle pieces, some of which are repeated throughout the semester. It is quite common for a student to write after six or eight weeks, that they now understand one of the puzzle pieces. For example, many students report in their journal, sometimes in the tenth or eleventh week of the semester, that they finally realized, I'm not actually trying to get them to smoke. Each student comes to a confrontation with the past individually and repeating messages allows them to process the message at their own speed. History is an individual confrontation with the past and has no meaning outside the individual who encounters it.

I should mention, one final staple of the show - the guest interview. The Show doesn't have much of a budget, so we make ourselves our own guests. Several times each semester, in each class, we have a special guest. Recently in my Michigan history class we interviewed Kevin Orr, the Detroit City manager. Of course, we didn't have the real Kevin Orr, ours was a student from the Detroit area. Instead of having a student do a presentation, the student is a guest on the show, and is interviewed by the host (myself). The host invites audience participation. The Kevin Orr interview generated a lot of discussion, most of it, sympathetic to the city manager. My students were untroubled by the loss of fundamental constitutional rights. I don't try to win them over to my view of anything, but I do present a counter argument to whatever they argue. So my remarks were all critical of the City Manager. Had the audience been critical, I would have taken the opposite position

and defended the Governor. For me, it was a great class; an animated discussion in a darkened room with plenty of sympathy for the devil.

### **Goals and Outcomes**

My primary goal is to get my students thinking. How can I know if I am achieving this objective? The single most important analytic tool I have is my students weekly journals which I read very carefully. I choose journals to post, or questions from journals. I respond directly to student journals through emails and I encourage my students to complain, by praising complaints and responding to them. I make a point of modifying the class in response to complaints. For example, when one student complained about the dark, I lightened the room a bit, when another complained about the profanity, I avoided it as much as possible. When students ask for more text review, I give them more text review.

More importantly, I use the journals every class to introduce student ideas, questions and suggestions. Students seem to enjoy the ability to contribute to the class and I make a point of using materials that students contribute. Over the years students have contributed many elements of the show, including lots of very funny videos and I always let the class know which elements were contributions by students in the past. I want them to understand that the show depends on them and any contribution they make may become a fixture of future shows. I try to give them a sense of a stake in the process.

### **Evaluating Outcomes**

I gauge my effectiveness by the materials my students give me. Student performance on the exams is important, but so too is their response to the exams. I always take time after each exam for students to discuss their grade and their answers to the questions. This is especially true for the simple multiple choice exams. I'm not so much concerned that a student chose the right answer as I am that they know the material and can offer a reason for the choice they made. I go out of my way to give students a few extra points after an exam as a way of encouraging them to argue for a higher grade. The argument is far more important than the answer.

In all my classes, I am reading student journals every week. In my upper level classes I am reading their essays, and even in the 100 level classes my students always have the possibility to write an essay for extra credit.

### **Evolution and future directions**

This past semester, I had a student comment that when she studied Hitler in high school, the teacher listed all the reasons why Hitler was evil. She was intrigued by my approach which was to explain why people loved and admired Hitler. I gave a lecture on the Nazi campaign against cigarette smoking, a campaign that came thirty years before the Surgeon General's Report on the dangers of smoking in 1964. This was the subject of a paper written by Glen Succaw, a History BA major who graduated in May 2013. The assignment was to write a paper that presented the Nazis in a positive light. In my Terrorism class, students were required to write a

paper nominating Osama bin Laden for a posthumous Nobel Peace Prize. I pointed out to the students that many terrorists had won such prizes, including Yasir Arafat and Menachem Begin. The most famous American terrorist, John Brown is the subject of a laudatory childrens biography. This approach to history was described by Walter Benjamin as “brush[ing] history against the grain.”<sup>3</sup>

When I began to develop this pedagogy there was a considerable amount of confusion and anger. Many students, lacking the ability to understand irony, didn’t understand why I was promoting something as unhealthy as cigarette smoking or asking them to think about Hitler differently than they had been taught. Today, despite the fact that the students are just as naïve and confused, for the most part, everyone understands that the class is a “show,” that I am the “host,” and that the things I do are similar to the things they see on television, including the commercials. They may be confused, but somehow, I have improved the delivery. I’ve essentially tweaked the presentation in a way that convinces them early on that the class is going to be fun and that while I’m confusing them, I’m not antagonizing them. I’m not completely sure how I have achieved this, but it has something to do with paying very close attention to their journals, which gives my students a sense that I am interested in their opinions. I often email students about their journal and this can be the beginning of a conversation carried on through the semester. If the journal is not personal, I post it on Blackboard and bring it up in class. I ask the student to tell us what they said and I use it to begin a discussion. In this way, I have been able to convince students that I am paying attention to their journals and I always post some journals that complain about some aspect of the class. I make a point of praising the student for complaining and then I address the complaint, often modifying the class. If a student complains about the room being too dark, I turn a little more light on. It doesn’t substantially change the ombiance and it gives the students a sense that the class belongs to them and I am here for them.

In the beginning the show was sponsored by Camels cigarettes and Jack Daniels Whiskey. The initial idea was to use the two products that were the economic foundation of the colonies, tobacco in the South and alcohol production in the North. However, after a few years I dropped Jack Daniels as a sponsor. The show today is sponsored only by Camels. This simplifies the focus, but is also avoids the use of a product which the students are abusing. My students loved the Jack Daniels commercials but their journals revealed widespread alcohol abuse and I found it unconscionable to continue the Jack Daniels sponsorship.

I have modified many aspects of the Show since my last attempt to evaluate my pedagogy in 2010 and I have become much more comfortable with my role as “host” rather than “teacher.” The job of a host is to make the guests feel at home. I’m still teaching, but I’m no longer trying to mold their opinions.

As for the future, I’m sure my pedagogy will continue to evolve. For the present, my

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<sup>3</sup> Walter Benjamin, “Theses on the Philosophy of History,” in *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*, edited by Hannah Arendt(New York: Schocken, 1968) p. 257.



immediate goal is to write an essay on my approach for publication in a journal of education.

### **Scholarship**

Between the years 2000 to 2014, I have published 15 articles and reviews which are listed in bold in my CV. I served as an outside peer reviewer for the University of Illinois Press, the University of Massachusetts Press, the Journal *Theory in Biosciences* and the Journal, *History of Intellectual Culture*. I also wrote eleven book reviews in that period, including six reviews for *History: Reviews of New Books* (Westview Press, Boulder Co). I also reviewed for the *Journal of the History of Biology*, the *Journal of American History* and *History and Philosophy of the Life Sciences*.

For 2009 to 2014, Google Scholar identifies 113 citations of my work, including 36 citations of my 1988 dissertation, an indication of the continued relevance of that work. The most recent citation identified by Google Scholar was to Stefan Kuhl's new book, *For the Betterment of the Race: The Rise and Fall of the International Eugenics Movement* (2013). Kuhl's first book, *The Nazi Connection* (Oxford 1994) also cited my work. In fact, Stefan was twice a guest in my home while he was working on his book which was partially based on ISAR archival materials. I would also like to mention Marianne Blacken's novel, *Bastionerna* (2005), a Finnish novel, in which I am fictionalized. One of the plots of the book involves Barry Mehler, the Director of the Institute for Academic Racism who is involved in exposing a racist professor.<sup>4</sup>

In 2000, Charles Allen, Jr., a crusading journalist who was the first to write about Nazi war criminals in the U.S., succumbed to early onset Alzheimers. At the time, no one was interested in Allen's work and many of his manuscripts remained unpublished. As one of Allen's closest friends, I was asked to take charge of his papers and books. I dropped everything and spent a week in New York packing up the contents of Allen's apartment including over 65 boxes of research notes, publications, FOIA searches and unpublished manuscriptes. Fourteen years later, Eric Lichtblau has published the first book on Nazi war criminals in the U.S. which credits Allen's work.<sup>5</sup> Last week, AP journalist, Randy Herschaft, contacted me to say that the he is keenly interested in seeing those manuscripts. We very well might see some of Allen's manuscripts posthumously published.

I have been awarded eight grants totalling more than \$25,000 between 2000 and 2014. Between 2010 and 2012, I was awarded three \$5,000 grants to participate in a

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<sup>4</sup> Kuhl, Stefan, *For the Betterment of the Race: The Rise and Fall of the International Eugenics Movement* (New York: Palgrave, 2013); Kuhl, *The Nazi Connection Eugenics, American Racism, and German National Socialism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994) and Marianne Blacken, *Bastionerna* (Pieksamaki, Finland: Schildts Förlags, 2005).

<sup>5</sup> Eric Lichtblau, *The Nazis Next Door: How America Became a Safe Haven for Hitler's Men* (Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2014). For a discussion of Charles Allen's role, see, [http://www.democracynow.org/2014/10/31/the\\_nazis\\_next\\_door\\_eric\\_lichtblau](http://www.democracynow.org/2014/10/31/the_nazis_next_door_eric_lichtblau).

federal program aimed at improving history education in public schools. I also received two major awards from the Diversity office, one in 2010 and one in 2013, both grants were used to organize major campus events. Finally, I was awarded nearly \$3,000 from the Timme Travel Fund and the Department of Humanities for my trip to Israel in 2012.

In this same period, I have organized or presented in seventeen programs, including a seminar at the Hebrew University, two Humanities Colloquium Series presentations as well as presentations at the Old Jail, the History Center in Traverse City and several appearances on Ferris television. I have also taken six research trips, including three to New York and one to Nortre Dame in Indiana to attend a seminar led by the French philosopher, Emmanuel Faye on Martin Heidegger.

### **Service**

Most of my service work as been related to advancing the prominence and importance of history locally and statewide. I joined the Big Rapids Historical Preservation Commission (BRHPC, Bryan Ridenour, Chair) in the Fall 2010. The BRHPC manages two historic properties in Big Rapids, the Old Jail (1893, 220 S. Stewart) and the Bergelin House (1873, SW corner of Elm St. and Winter Ave.). The Bergelin House serves as a museum displaying furniture manufactured in Big Rapids. As an active member of the BRHPC, I attend monthly meetings as well as help with fund raising and program planning. I arranged for the Phi Alpha Theta History Honors Society to have their inductions at the Old Jail while arranging for books left over from the semi-annual Old Jail yardsale transferred to Phi Alpha Theta for their annual book sale on the quad, thus encouraging our students to involve themselves in historic preservation. In April 2012, I ran a program, "Historic Preservation in the Holy Land," at the Old Jail, discussing the similarities and differences between historic preservation here and there. In July 2012, I brought history to our local health food store, All About Health (207 S. Michigan Ave.) with a presentation on the history of Jewish Dietary Law and the meaning of the symbols commonly found on health food containers and wrappers.

From 2002 to 2006, I served on the Advisory Board for Immediate Family, an organization that provided emergency shelter for battered or abused individuals in non-traditional relationships. Between 2003 and 2004, I serviced on the Ferris Faculty Associations Executieve Board. From 2005 to 2010, I served on the FSU Historical Taskforce Committee which organized our 125th Anniversary celebrations. During the same period, I served on the Humanities Department Tenure Review Committee, as chair from 2008-2010. During this period I also served as advisor for our History Minors. In 2005, I helped organized and prepare the first Academic Program Review for the History B.A.

Since 2010, I have participated in the Humanities Department transition from Department Head to Department Chair, attending all of the planning sessions and joining the Conflict Resolutions Committee, chaired by Susan Morris. While Dr.



Tracy Busch is the official faculty advisor for our History Honors Society, Phi Alpha Theta, I attend the meetings regularly and have helped with the book sales and conference planning. I have actively participated in our area's recruitment efforts and have been instrumental in drawing several students to the History program and I also am a regular at the Spring Commencement exercises.

In March 2011, I worked with a local businessman, Charles Hunsinger, to organize a symposium held in the Rankin Student Center Centennial Room on, "Defining the Essence and Purpose of Human Life." I have been a Judge for the Michigan History Day competition for the past decade. This competition brings elementary, Middle School and High School students together in an all day competition in which students demonstrate their understanding of a historical topic such as "Revolutions and Historical Change" or "Turning Points in History" using documentary film, display boards, acting and traditional academic papers. My commitment to the Michigan History Day State Finals is part of an ongoing service to encourage young people to careers that involve historical analysis. In 2011, The History Program's second Academic Program Review took place and I was responsible for Section I of the program review process. Other authors of the final report included, Kimn Carlton-Smith, Gary Huey and Jana Pisani.

I have done a number of campus wide programs through the Diversity Office and I received two grants, one in 2010 and one in 2014, the first to bring Leonard Zeskind, author of *Blood and Politics* (2010) and Aviva Cantor, author of *Jewish Women, Jewish Men* (1995) and I have worked with the Political Engagement Project (PEP) from 2007 to 2009 and I will be working with PEP again next semester to bring JoEllen Vinyard, author of *Right in Michigan's Grassroots: From the KKK to the Michigan Militia* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2011).